DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 434 305 CS 013 659

TITLE	NAEP State-by-State: Cautious Conclusions.
INSTITUTION	International Reading Association, Newark, DE.
ISSN	ISSN-0737-4208
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	8p.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	Reading Today; v16 n6 Jun-Jul 1999
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Comparative Analysis; Grade 4; Intermediate Grades; *National Competency Tests; *Reading Achievement; Reading Tests; *Standardized Tests; *Test Interpretation; Test Results; Test Use
IDENTIFIERS	*National Assessment of Educational Progress; *State Reading Assessments

ABSTRACT

The state-by-state comparisons of results on the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) present the literacy community with some good news and a bit of a puzzle: scores have improved, but the results cannot provide answers as to why one grade or state is doing better or worse than in the past. State-by-state results show that Colorado, Connecticut, Kentucky, Maryland, South Carolina, Virginia, and Washington were among the states that made statistically significant gains from 1994 to 1998. Many experts questioned suggestions that states with strong standards movements improved, noting that standards have not been in place long enough. Comparisons across states are also dangerous in that data cannot be used to suggest specific reading instruction strategies unless the populations from state to state are homogeneous and similar in terms of numerous socioeconomic factors. Poverty has more to do with test scores than anything else. Urban high poverty states tend to do less well. Montana, which scored right behind Connecticut, has excellent public schools but also a stable student population that speaks English and comes from families tuned into the majority system of education. Although results of the NAEP are heartening, Americans have much to do in their quest to be a nation of educated people. Contains a chart listing average scale score, grade 4, from the 1998 NAEP; and a comparison of state versus national average reading scores for public schools. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 434 305

NAEP state-by-state: Cautious conclusions

When the results from the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were released back in February, the state-by-state comparisons were held back because, officials said, of a technical problem in their computation. In March, the state-by-state comparisons were released, and once again the literacy community was presented with some good news and a bit of a puzzle.

In both the U.S. nationwide and state-by-state results, there has been improvement over the 1994 scores, the last time NAEP was administered. The NAEP test, which is known as "the nation's report card," measures such trends well.

But NAEP is not a study or experiment-it does not isolate variables to determine cause and effect. It only measures how well or poorly American students did since the last test. Studies happen in a clean, controlled environment; NAEP is a measure of the murky, messy, multivariate world of day-to-day life.

Because of this, NAEP will not tell us the reasons that one grade or state is doing better or worse than it used to. We want and need to know why Johnny can't read well or why Janey can, but NAEP doesn't answer those questions. It does, however, provide hints, clues, and patterns on which knowledgeable observers can base an educated guess.

Then there are observers with little or no knowledge who allow themselves a great deal more latitude in drawing grand conclusions; the media, politicians, and many other self-appointed experts in education have sometimes attributed poor NAEP showings to one single factor-in California in 1994, it was the state's literature-based language arts program without very much compelling evidence.

Fortunately, the results were good in 1998. The nationwide results showed regained ground for the fourth and twelfth grades and significant advancement for the eighth (see the April/May 1999 issue of Reading Today). That pattern was reflected in the state-by-state results, which generally showed states regaining their 1992 levels in 1998 following the general decline experienced in 1994.

Professional development

Cathy Roller, IRA's director of research and policy, is among those who offered comments on the state-by-state results. While cautious about drawing unwarranted conclusions, she does see some significant patterns in the data.

CS 013 659

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"Interpreting NAEP state-by-state reresults is a tricky business," Roller says. "What the results do tell us is that the states fall into roughly three groups that can be distinguished from one another: an average group, an above average group, and a below average group.

"In addition, the state-by-state results tell us which states show a statistically significant improvement. From 1994 to 1998, Colorado, Connecticut, Kentucky, Maryland, South Carolina, Virginia, and Washington were among the states that made statistically significant gains. The question everyone would like to have the answer to is, 'Why did these states improve while others did not.'

"It is tempting to suggest, as Secretary Riley did, that states with strong standards movements improved. However, many experts questioned this interpretation, saying that standards have not been in place long enough to affect scores and that demographic shifts may be as' much responsible as standards efforts and curriculum changes.

"Another factor that has been hypothesized as affecting the scores is emphasis on professional development for teachers. For example, Connecticut has invested heavily in grant programs that support early intervention reading programs, such as Reading Recovery, and include a strong teacher development component, summer schools, Saturday academies, and teacher training centers. Maryland has enacted a law that requires all teachers to have had four courses in reading instruction.

"However, for every hypothesis cited there are examples of states that have also tried the strategy and not improved NAEP scores. It may be that it is a complex mix of strategies that is producing results.

"Another issue is the question of who is taking the tests. Recently released data suggest that there have been changes in the percentage of special education students exempted from taking the tests. For example, Connecticut, which ranked first in the state-by-state comparisons, also had a sizable increase in children exempted-10 percent, up from 6 percent in 1994. Two other states that showed statistically significant gains, Kentucky and Louisiana, also increased their exemption rates. Kentucky's was 4 percent in 1994, 10 percent in 1998, and Louisiana's was 6 percent in 1994, 13 percent in 1998."

Complex causes

IRA President Carol M. Santa also urges caution, and warns that the state-by-state results can mislead policy makers into making counterproductive decisions.

"There are a couple of things to think about when examining NAEP scores," Santa says. "NAEP is basically a test of reading comprehension, and the test data suggest a general increase in comprehension scores. Such increases must be interpreted cautiously.

"The fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders taking the test are too old to be influenced by the most recent legislative actions concerning reading. They are more likely influenced by shifts that took place five to 10 years ago. If we examine states that improved the most it is likely they set in place programs over the past few years that addressed literacy broadly and encouraged increased reading, more writing, and a focus on early intervention.

"For example, I am not surprised that Connecticut came out on top and also showed the most improvement in NAEP scores. Over the last few years, Connecticut has made a concerted effort to improve reading proficiencies, particularly for children in the poorest urban districts, by providing extra support for early intervention programs.

"Staff development in improving comprehension instruction has also become a priority in Connecticut. This focus on comprehension instruction plus an emphasis on early intervention may account for some of the increase in NAEP scores.

"I am always troubled about state-by-state comparisons of educational data like NAEP. Such comparisons become an unfair horse race and discouraging to states scoring on the bottom.

"Comparisons across states are also dangerous in that the data cannot be used to suggest specific reading instruction strategies unless one can assume that the populations from state to state are homogeneous and similar in terms of numerous socioeconomic factors such as income, employment, ethnicity classroom size, etc.

"I most worry about prescribed quick fixes for states scoring on the lower end of the distribution-tighter standards, skills-based instruction, more assessments, top-down driven curriculum, and more restrictions on teacher decisions.

"NAEP scores actually reflect deeper issues in our country. Poverty has more to do with test scores than anything else. Urban high-poverty states tend do less well. I look at my own state, Montana. We scored right behind Connecticut. I would like to think that our performance is due to our remarkable education system. Yes, we do have excellent public schools, but our students make it easy for us to look good. English is spoken by everyone, the population is stable, and most children come from families tuned into the majority system of education.

"I am afraid that our high performance has little to do with standards or the type of reading programs offered in schools. Instead, it has to do with competent teachers and children who come to school ready to learn. Besides that, our long, dark winters are highly conducive to reading!"

More work needed

IRA President-elect Carmelita Kimber Williams notes that while there is quite a bit of work yet to do, the good news about gains in reading achievement across the board is heartening.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"According to the reports from the states," Williams says, "children are improving and making some progress in reading achievement.

"We still have problems that need to be dealt with, as evidenced by the fact that economics play a strong part in the quality of education that a child receives. Children born into minority families are still playing catch-up when it comes to educational achievement.

"But progress is also being made here, and this is important because we don't want to leave any child uneducated as we move toward strong leadership for the United States and for the world.

"The United States continues to be strong because we do, in fact, seek to educate all our children. And it can be a brighter future for them if we provide them with the best resources available for achieving reading excellence and successful learning experiences. We have much work to do as we continue in our quest to be a nation of educated people."

Copyright 1999 International Reading Association

Average scale score, Grade 4

	1992	1994	1998
Nation	215	212	215*
States			
Alabama	207	208	211
Arizona	209	206	207
Arkansas	211	209	209
California†	202	197	202
Colorado	217	215	222***
Connecticut	222	222	232***
Delaware	215	206	212**
Florida	208	205	207
Georgia	212	207	210
Hawaii	205	201	200
Iowa†	225	225	225
Kansas†	—	—	222
Kentucky	215	212	218***
Louisiana	204	197	204**
Maine	227	228	225
Maryland	211	210	215*
Massachusetts†	226	225	225
Michigan	216	—	217
Minnesota†	221	218	222
Mississippi	199	202	204*
Missouri	220	217	216
Montana†	—	222	226
Nevada	—	—	208
New Hampshire†	228	225	226
New Mexico	211	205	206
New York†	215	212	216
North Carolina	212	214	217**
Oklahoma	220	—	220
Oregon	—	—	214
Rhode Island	217	220	218
South Carolina	210	205	210**
Tennessee	212	215	212
Texas	215	212	217
Utah	220	217	215**
Virginia	221	215	218*
Washington	—	215	217*
West Virginia	216	215	216
Wisconsin†	224	224	224
Wyoming	225	221	219*
Other Jurisdictions			
District of Columbia	188	179	182**
DDESS	—	—	220
DoDDS	—	218	225**
Virgin Islands	171	—	178*

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

** Indicates that the average scale score in 1998 was significantly different from that in 1992 using a multiple comparison procedure based on all jurisdictions that participated both years. * Indicates that the average scale score in 1998 was significantly different from that in 1992 if only one jurisdiction is being examined. ++ Indicates that the average scale score in 1998 was significantly different from that in 1994 using a multiple comparison procedure based on all jurisdictions that participated both years. + Indicates that the average scale score in 1998 was significantly different from that in 1994 if only one jurisdiction or the nation is being examined.
— Indicates jurisdiction did not participate. † Indicates jurisdiction did not meet one or more of the guidelines for school participation. DDESS: Department of Defense Domestic Dependent Elementary and Secondary Schools. DoDDS: Department of Defense Dependents Schools (Overseas). NOTE: National results are based on the national assessment sample, not on aggregated state assessment samples. Differences between states and jurisdictions may be partially explained by other factors not included in this table.
SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 1992, 1994, and 1998 Reading Assessments.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

1998 Grade 4 comparison of state vs. national average reading scores for public schools

Above the national average	Colorado	DoDDS	Maine	Montana†	Wisconsin†
	Connecticut	Iowa†	Massachusetts†	New Hampshire†	
	DDESS	Kansas†	Minnesota†	Oklahoma	
At or around the national average	Kentucky	Missouri	Oregon	Texas	Washington
	Maryland	New York†	Rhode Island	Utah	West Virginia
	Michigan	North Carolina	Tennessee	Virginia	Wyoming
Below the national average	Alabama	California†	Florida	Louisiana	New Mexico
	Arizona	Delaware	Georgia	Mississippi	South Carolina
	Arkansas	District of Columbia	Hawaii	Nevada	Virgin Islands

† Indicates jurisdiction did not meet one or more of the guidelines for school participation.
NOTE: Differences between states and jurisdictions may be partially explained by other factors not included in these tables.
SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 1998 Reading Assessment.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE